

This Way Forward: Alberta buys into Bullfrog Power's green energy

Alberta has a reputation as an oil-friendly province. So why did an Ontario green energy retailer choose the province as its first new market?

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by Myrna Kostash

I first saw the leaping, lime-green amphibian on a small lawn sign stuck in my friend's snowbank. "This home is bullfrog-powered," it declared gaily, "with 100 per cent green electricity." That included the Christmas tree lights. And now my condo is green-powered, too, and the frog leaps around my street-facing window. I admit that I'm a sucker for this kind of marketing: a cute mascot defending Mother Nature.

Bullfrog Power, launched in 2005 in Ontario, is a retailer of green energy in several provinces, including Alberta, where it is 100 per cent wind-sourced (the company has invested in the Oldman River Wind Farm a few kilometres northeast of Pincher Creek). In my 1,250-square-foot condo, which is located far away from wind turbines, I continue to draw my power needs from the conventional grid, but Bullfrog Power keeps track of my consumption and matches it with "green energy" that it, in turn, injects into the grid. The more a household consumes, the more green stuff goes in to make up the slack. This costs, of course: green energy is more expensive – in my case a whopping increase of \$3.30 a month. (Maybe that's because I almost never run the clothes dryer.)

I'm not the only Albertan who has signed up. Unsurprisingly, Calgary's Community Natural Foods (two stores and a head office) has signed up for 100 per cent green electricity and 100 per cent green gas. But so have three of Alberta's Walmart stores. And 68 Mac's locations in Alberta, TD ATMs in several branches, Shaw's three Calgary corporate offices, 22 CIBC Alberta branches and PCL's Calgary district office and yard. I could go on.hed

Did you know that Alberta was the first market that Ontario-based Bullfrog hopped into? I didn't. That's why I picked up the phone and called Tom Heintzman, Bullfrog Power's president. I wanted to know why – and what it said about us as Albertans. "There were a whole bunch of reasons we opened a regional office in Calgary," he told me, "including the fact, from conversations and customers, that Albertans appreciate the value of natural resources – all natural resources, wind and water among them. So we thought we should be taking advantage of this pervasive attitude."

While most Albertans cringe at our reputation – deserved or not – as a cheerleader for dirty oil, Bullfrog sees the province in a different light. “Bullfrog Power emphasizes that Albertans know the value of natural resources,” Heintzman said. “Alberta has been way ahead of the rest of the country in producing wind energy, although there is now more development in Ontario. And Alberta would be a fantastic place to source green natural gas.” Albertans should value what we have in abundance, in this case farm waste, sewage treatment plants and landfills – all organic wastes that produce methane gas. So far, there is only one facility in Canada, in Quebec, that turns it into green gas, but Bullfrog Power sees a future for renewable natural gas in Alberta. That will come in time, Heintzman said, but the company is focused on continuing to build its presence in the province. “We’re concentrating on growing our market in Alberta first.”

Because Bullfrog Power operates in Ontario, Nova Scotia and B.C., as well as Alberta, the company has experienced “different entrepreneurial cultures across the country,” Heintzman said. Alberta’s culture stands out as the spirit of people who “definitely have a higher degree of confidence in an individual’s ability to solve problems with less reliance on government intervention. A strong sense of get-the-red-tape-out-of-the-way confidence.” I asked him if he had experienced this for Bullfrog’s operation itself. You bet, he said. “Alberta is much more open in the way the electricity system works – it’s not a monopoly, it’s deregulated.”

If I’m hearing Heintzman correctly, he isn’t just saying Alberta is open to green energy. He’s saying that it’s one of the best places in the country to produce it. That sounds good to me.